Balázs Vargha DLA
University Professor
Ferenczy Noémi Award-winning Graphic Designer

Cover letter

I have more than three decades of experience at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, having been involved with the institution as a student, practicing artist, lecturer, researcher, and director. Over the past nearly twenty years, I have gained extensive experience in various leadership roles—as Head of Department, Institute Director, and candidate for Rector—providing me with a comprehensive understanding of the institutional structures and operating models of both Hungarian and international higher education. These experiences have strengthened my conviction that the long-term development of universities rests on professional autonomy, responsible institutional governance, and a strong commitment to the university community. Therefore I wish to contribute my knowledge and experience to shaping the future of MOME, including through service as a member of its Board of Trustees.

I firmly believe that MOME is an intellectual hub whose strategic mission is not merely to follow but also to shape international discourse at the intersection of art, design, science, and technology. An interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach plays a defining role in this endeavor, addressing questions of technological and social innovation through the creative, research-based, and critical methodologies of design and arts. MOME's mission to educate and empower creators, researchers, and leaders who respond to the challenges of our time and actively shape the social and cultural landscape of the future strongly resonates with my own professional values and approach.

Hungarian higher education is once again facing a period of profound transformation. There is now a realistic opportunity to restore the democratic foundations of university self-governance and institutional autonomy. Achieving this, however, requires an honest assessment of the experiences of recent years, as well as drawing the lessons that can provide a sound basis for establishing a more equitable, predictable, and sustainable institutional framework for the long term.

As a university leader and member of the Senate, I was able to follow the 2020 change in the university's governing and funding structure closely and directly throughout the entire process. I therefore have first-hand experience of both the pre-model-change and post-model-change periods, which enables me to compare the characteristics and operational dynamics of the two institutional models. These experiences are particularly valuable in the current situation, when there is once again an opportunity to establish a more modern and democratic governance structure, more closely aligned with international academic standards.

Following the transition, it gradually became clear to me that the maintainer's approach was shifting increasingly towards direct control rather than strategic partnership. Interventions in personnel decisions, as well as in the competences of university leadership and the Senate, indicated that the maintainer was, in several areas, exceeding the traditional and legal boundaries of university autonomy. This not only

created organizational tensions but also contributed, over the longer term, to a weakening of institutional trust.

I consider it particularly important to mention the 2023 rectoral selection process, in which I was directly involved. With the support of my candidacy, the Senate elected me as its candidate for Rector; however, the Board of Trustees decided instead to nominate another candidate. I do not regard this merely as a personal matter, but as an institutional experience that clearly demonstrated to me how vulnerable university autonomy had become following the transition to the new governance model. As I believed that, by its decision, the maintainer had exceeded the limits of its lawful role, I initiated legal proceedings with the support of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee.

I would like to highlight this circumstance because, as a candidate for the Board of Trustees, I have also witnessed how an unclear division of responsibilities between the maintainer and the university's self-governing bodies can lead to serious institutional conflicts. Through this process, I also gained in-depth knowledge of the legal, institutional, and cultural dimensions of university autonomy, reinforcing my conviction that the relationship between the maintainer and the university must be based on clear rules that are mutually respected.

As a member of the Board of Trustees, my primary responsibility would be to ensure that these lessons are reflected in the development of a new, democratic governance model. I firmly believe that the role of the maintainer is not to manage the university's day-to-day operations, but to safeguard its institutional autonomy, provide strategic support, and ensure the transparent and responsible use of public funds.

During its transitional mandate, I believe the newly established Board of Trustees can, above all, contribute to ensuring that the change in the university's governance and funding structure is carried out professionally, responsibly, and smoothly. The key to this is a clear delineation of legal responsibilities and competences, the restoration of institutional safeguards for university autonomy, and the establishment of a governance structure that simultaneously guarantees professional freedom, transparent financial management, and the university's long-term development. I also consider it essential that this structure provides predictable, stable, and transparent operating conditions for the university community as a whole.

As a member of the Board of Trustees, I would place particular emphasis on three areas:

- **strengthening the institutional safeguards of university autonomy,** with particular regard to the decision-making competences of the Senate and the principle of university self-governance;
- **establishing the maintainer's role as a strategic partner,** supporting the university's international competitiveness as well as its research and innovation ambitions;
- **rebuilding trust between the university community and the maintainer**, as the success of the coming period can only be achieved through mutual cooperation and open dialogue.

My previous leadership experience, together with my consistent commitment to safeguarding university autonomy, provides me with an institutional perspective that can contribute to the development of a more democratic and sustainable operating model. These experiences have taught me not only to recognize institutional challenges, but also to understand the necessity of addressing them through practical and effective measures.

My detailed proposals and vision regarding the above are set out in my application for the position of Rector. Should I be appointed to the Board of Trustees, I would make this material freely available for use, thereby contributing to the sound basis of the Board's strategic decision-making.

Throughout its nearly 150-year history, MOME has been at its strongest when it remained faithful to its intellectual heritage while embracing the challenges of the future. I am convinced that we are once again facing such a historic moment. It would be a great honor to contribute, as a member of the Board of Trustees, to ensuring that MOME continues its development as an autonomous, open, democratically governed, and internationally influential institution.